(S//SI) SIGINT Monitors Global Spread of Avian Flu

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(U) Will a lethal new strain spread beyond Eurasia?...

(S//SI) SIGINT Enterprise analysts are closely monitoring the spread of a lethal strain of avian influenza that has killed or forced the slaughter of over 160 million birds across Asia and in two years infected more than 120 people worldwide, killing 62. Currently this is a disease almost entirely contained in the bird population, but the World Health Organization is very concerned that in time the virus may develop the ability to pass easily from human to human. Recent outbreaks of highly pathogenic avian influenza (H5N1) in birds have been confirmed in Europe and there is concern it may spread to bird populations in other regions of the world.

(S//SI) Migratory birds, especially waterfowl, have been a primary agent in this geographic leap, causing new animal and human populations to be at risk of exposure to the disease. Experts are concerned that as birds migrate southward, regions such as east Africa with poor health infrastructures, will be overwhelmed and unable to contain the deadly virus in their bird populations. (According to press, because the migratory birds have already flown over the U.S. towards their winter homes, it is unlikely that we will face the threat of the virus being carried into the country by feathered visitors this year.)

(U/FOUO) Avian flu exists almost everywhere. There are 15 subtypes of influenza virus known to infect birds, but the highly pathogenic forms tend to be caused by influenza A viruses of subtypes H5 and H7. "Highly pathogenic" refers only to the virus' ability to cause disease in birds, this term does not apply to human infection. The H5N1 strain first emerged in Hong Kong in 1997, causing the death or destruction of 1.5 million birds and sickening 18 people, killing six.

(U//FOUO) It re-emerged in 2003 in South Korea, and has now spread across Asia, into Russia and Europe. It is the virus's tendency to make mistakes when replicating itself that makes it so dangerous and unpredictable. Human to human transmission has not yet been confirmed. Although experts believe that mutation will occur, it is unknown at this time how virulent the resulting strain will be.

(S//SI) NSA analysts are also monitoring worldwide reactions to the spread of the virus and preparations for a possible pandemic. Analysts are also closely engaged with the other members of the IC as well as our Second and Third Party Partners to stay abreast of developments. As our IC colleagues have said, containing the threat of infectious disease comes down to "detection, detection, detection. SIGINT is probably going to get it first."

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(U) See a message from OHESS for more information on the avian flu.

(U) Animal health workers test killed wild ducks in Siberia for avian flu virus. (Reuters)
